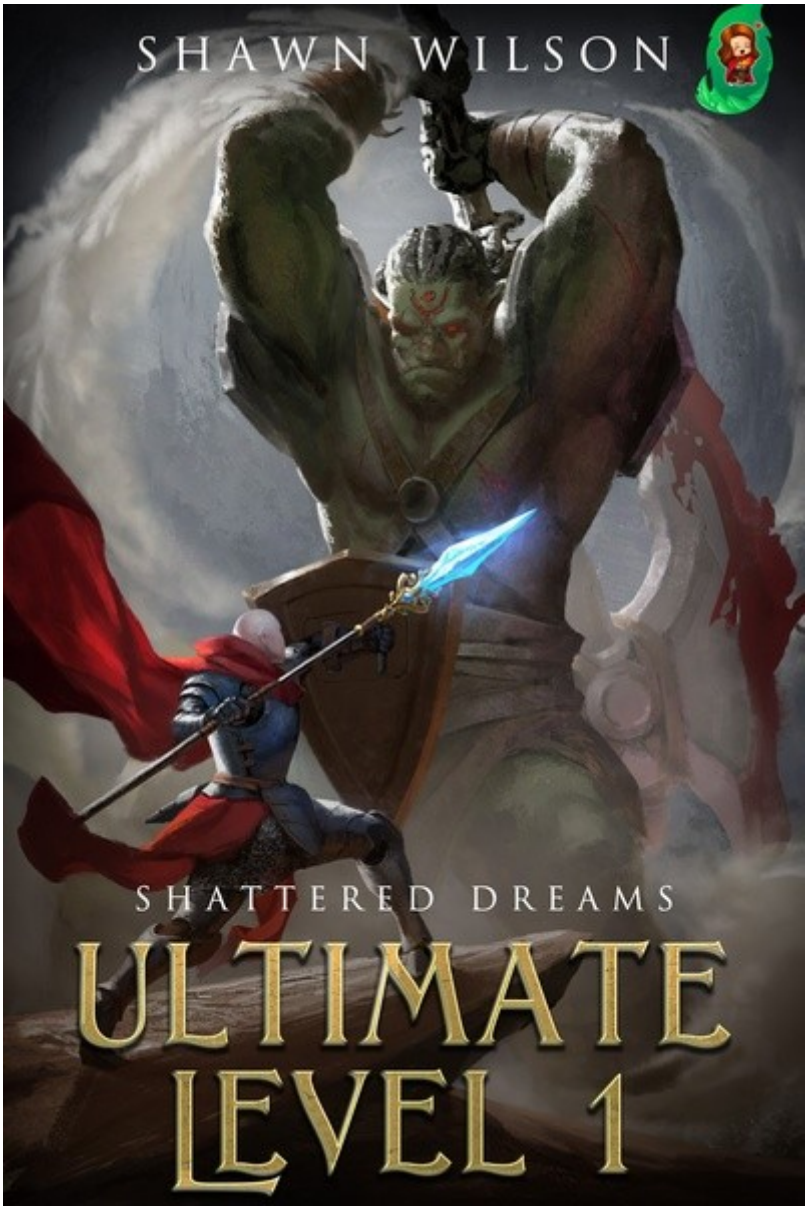

Max wanted to be a [Baker].
Settle down, bake stuff, and enjoy life.
The gods, however, ruined that dream. Given [Baker] and a black skill, he is now running for his life, trying to grow strong enough to return home.

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[patreon chapter list https://www.patreon.com/collection/176837?view=expanded]

PAT 1 **Ultimate Level 1 - Chapter 001 - Who wants to be a baker?** https://www.patreon.com/posts/91771815 2023-10-27

Max refused to piss himself while waiting in line. He went before he left, of course, but his whole life had come down to a god's whim, and now there were twisting needles running from his bladder down into his balls and up into his gut. He couldn't piss himself. Not with his family with him and the whole town watching. Waiting to see what the gods chose for him.

Max was still thin. Weathered from working with his dad on the sheep farm. The smell of lanolin never quite left his clothes and hands. He wanted to smell like bread and have a life with Nancy. After hundreds of hours of kneading, folding, and rolling out dough, he should unlock the [Baker] skill. The gods chose, though, and he knew he might get something different. Being human meant Max was most likely to end up with a skill that dealt with agriculture or crafting.

Or you could be one of the chosen few pushing back the front lines against the monsters and other sapients- an adventurer. But he could still taste Nancy's kisses on his lips, taste the apricot jam she put in the cookies, and he could smell the flour on her hands and the bread baking in her ovens. He could hear her pledge echoing in his ears.

He *would* be a baker. They would wed as soon as his apprenticeship was done. Their parents had already informally agreed to their courtship, but they couldn't formalize it until he learned his skill. His skill was going to be his life. And it was in the god's hands now. And Max was desperate for a piss, even though he hadn't had a drink in hours.

”*Please don’t let mine suck like that one did*, Max pleaded in his head as he heard the guild advisor shout out [Shephard] for the young man who had just gotten his life’s path chosen for him. Max fervently began praying again as he waited in line behind the people before him.

Once a year, the adventurer guild brought the skill shard to each town, allowing everyone who turned eighteen since their last visit to see what skill they would be given.

It had been four months since he turned eighteen, yet every day since the last time he had been here, all he could think about was getting the [Baker] skill. Since Nancy had received that skill last year, he wanted nothing more than to spend his days making things with her.

“Your sister is hoping you get something cool like swordsman or caster,” Caleb called out from behind him, breaking his train of thought.

Max shuddered at that thought as he heard Caleb start to chuckle. His body couldn’t stay still as the chills kept running through him at the thought of being an adventurer. It was hard to stand still between the need to piss and the fear of being a fighter. Not one to admit his cowardness, he preferred to be a lover and not a fighter. Or at least he had told Nancy that a thousand times.

Thankfully, only one out of every twenty humans was given a skill worthy of being an adventurer. Each race had different chances for skill selection, yet it seemed harder for the human race to receive a skill that gave them the adventurer path. No one knew why the other races were most often gifted with combat skills. Perhaps the gods were still punishing humans for the wars of the past. Most would be merchants, craftsmen, and workers.

“You still planning on joining the [Baker’s] guild?” Caleb asked as he nudged Max in the back. “Your sister told me you already had the initiation fee saved up.”

“Just like you are praying for the [Warriors] guild,” he shot back over his shoulder. “None of that really matters as long as we both end up with something. I’m just glad no one has been an *unskilled* this year.”

Ignoring the shiver that ran through him, Max glanced at the families lining the street, ignoring Caleb and his teasing. For the last mile on both sides of the road were all the townspeople and nobles with children who had turned eighteen, each in their best clothes, waiting to celebrate whatever skill their child received. Formal dresses, simple outfits, full-on suits, and the fancy getups the nobles wore were on display. Cheers were given when a teen, now considered a young adult, was bestowed with a skill that would

give them a promising job and future. Loud applause and celebration could be heard for minutes when a person acquired a combat skill. Thankfully, no one had experienced the worst response today. The cries and wailing from a family when a child was led away after being listed as unskilled was a horrible thing he had only experienced twice.

Max ran his hands along the pleats of his best outfit, knowing there were no wrinkles since his mother had pressed it about a dozen times. He was trying to wipe the sweat that kept forming on his palms.

He spotted his sister, Stacy, off up ahead with his parents, standing on her tiptoes and smiling at him as he waited his turn. She wore that pink dress she loved because she caught his friend Caleb ogling at her when she wore it. The long hours she spent practicing with the town guard were evident by the muscles and shape of her body. He found himself smiling, knowing next year would be her turn. Her dream of being an adventurer and conquering the towers and dungeons since they were kids might finally come true.

Thinking about that caused him to fidget in line, the pain in his bladder bothering him still.

I just want a skill that makes life easy. Please, gods, hear my prayer. No blacksmithing or farming. [Baker]!

His mind ran back to when he had gone to the temple and given a small offering the day before. The priests had laughed when they asked what he was praying for. Helping his father work all those long days caring for sheep had taught him he didn't want a job like that. The smell and constant noise had driven him crazy.

Something indoors, perhaps a job crafting jewelry or even in a bank, would be okay if a bakery wasn't an option.

Most importantly, something without risk.

A loud roar of cheers snapped him out of his thoughts. Someone just got the [Scout] skill! He didn't recognize the boy up there, but Max could only imagine how jealous a few of the others in line would be. Too many people seemed to think a life of adventure would be grand.

Letting his mind wander to take it off the call of nature that seemed to overwhelm him, Max thought about how each child had to work in different trades from the age of thirteen. Exposure to all these things was believed to give them a better chance of success and the skill they desired. Nothing had ever really piqued his interest until he met Nancy and tasted her pastries. Glancing up at the platform, he saw the newest [Blacksmith] smiling from ear to ear as he raised his hands in excitement. Being sweaty and dirty was not

his idea of a good time, so he had always found a way to leave early and relax elsewhere.

A push from behind came, and he turned. His best friend Caleb was smiling from ear to ear like a fool.
“That guy is so lucky. The [Scout] skill can set one for life,” Caleb groaned as he pointed at the next person moving to the stage. “I don’t know that one. Do you?”
Checking out who Caleb was talking about, Max didn’t recognize the well-dressed guy, but he knew it had to be a noble. The clothes he wore were far nicer than his. They were far nicer than most of the kids in line.
A sapphire blue suit with long tails in the back and those shiny black shoes made it easy to point out the difference between haves and have-nots.
“I’d bet he gets something cush like the rest of them,” Max stated before groaning after hearing what he had received. “How the heck does that happen?”
“*Will of the gods*.” joked Caleb as he whispered his reply.
“[Administration] and [Banking]!” shouted the advisor once more to make sure everyone had heard. A huge grin ran across his face as he held the boy's hand in the air. The red robe that he wore almost matched the color of his face as he shouted.
Thunderous applause echoed across the courtyard and street as the crowd recognized the rarity of two skills.
“That’s like one in a hundred thousand,” hissed Caleb as he clapped his hands out of obligation. “Damn nobles! Always with the crazy crap, I swear the gods listen to their prayers more than ours, or something is off. It’s always like that!”
Max bobbed his head as he saw the blond-headed teen raise his hands toward the crowd. Two skills were almost unheard of. Everyone believed different things about how it appeared certain nobles always got better skills or the occasional double skill. The truth was only the nobles seemed to know, and they sure weren’t sharing.
“I guess we need to offer more to the temple if we want two skills,” mumbled Max as he frowned at Caleb. “That like, sucks all the joy out of everyone else. Why not put that guy at the end of the line?”
He knew Caleb was nodding as they turned to watch the last six before him wait their turn. He searched the crowd and saw Nancy by his sister's side. Her green eyes were watching him, and he smiled. The combination of her red hair and yellow dress almost took his breath away. He would have stopped there and stared at her forever if Caleb hadn’t begun beating on his back for him to

keep moving. She gave him a wink and blew him a kiss. He felt a smile running from ear to ear on his face when he noticed the basket she held in her hand. She had made celebration treats!
Please let me be a [Baker]! I'll give twenty percent of all the money I make!
Unsure if his prayer was even heard, his foot almost tripped over the steps leading to the stone podium. His legs seemed to be failing as he clenched his pelvic muscles tightly.
Caleb's steady hand grabbed the back of his shirt, keeping him from falling over and looking like a fool before the entire town.
Shaking his head, Max forced himself to focus. Now was not the time to think about eating desserts with Nancy.
"You're dancing like you're going to piss yourself or pass out!" Caleb snapped at him from behind. "Is that tiny bladder of yours causing a problem?"
Looking over his shoulder, Max glared at him and saw Caleb start to chuckle. He didn't have a tiny bladder, no matter what anyone said!
Caleb's head motion forced him to turn around, and he realized he was standing on the base of the platform. Looking forward, he saw the five representatives watching and waiting to see who might be given a skill worthy of their time. The back four looked half asleep as they stood almost motionless in their red robes with the large golden stripe that ran down the front. Their faces were blank as they gazed at the back of the only one actively doing anything. Even with their expressionless faces, something about them screamed danger.
An older man with maybe one hundred grey hairs on his head and enough wrinkles to prove he had seen a few things called out the skills as they were revealed from the shard. He would smile at every teen who came forward and whispered something before making them put their hands on both sides of the crystal shard. Each time, the shard would change colors before it finally settled on one shade of something, and then somehow, the older man would get a notification in his status screen, telling him what they had been given. Over the years, Max had seen him laugh, tell jokes, and even encourage the teen who had received a skill they did not want. The few times an individual had received no skill, he had quietly ushered them away to one of the four who were standing behind him.
Turning again, Max smiled at his parents, sister, and Nancy, waving and cheering for him.
"Please step forward," the man informed him in a deep and precise voice. He flashed a toothy smile. "What is your name?"

“Max Hoste,” he replied, his voice cracking and making his face flush.
“No need to be worried, my boy,” the man stated with a wink as he motioned to the shard. “You have seen this done hundreds of times. Simply come close and put your hands on both sides and let's see what the gods have gifted you!”
Taking a deep breath, Max nodded and took the two steps required to approach the shard. As he prepared to put a hand on each side, he paused, noticing the courtyard was quiet. It never seemed quiet when anyone else had done this.
“The shard,” the older man whispered.
Bobbing his head, Max snapped out of the fog he had been in and put his hands on the clear shard of crystal.
It felt warm and smooth. Almost slick like ice and yet somehow warm like a fresh cake.
The shard began to flash dark colors before turning black and staying the color of night with no light.
Max glanced up from the shard, having never seen it this color before, and noticed the older man looking at him and shards with a puzzled look. His eyebrows were raised, and one eye was cocked at him.
The other four behind the old man had lost their blank looks and were now staring at him and the shard.
If the courtyard had seemed quiet before, it was now like a graveyard as everyone waited to hear what this different color meant.
“What does your status say, boy?!” the older man exclaimed. His voice was low but gruff and able to strip bark off a tree. “What skills do you have?”
Noticing the look on his face and how his two white eyebrows had become one, Max wasted no time checking.
Skills?
[Status Check]
*****
Max Hoste
18-Year-old Human Male
Level 1
Exp 0/1000
HP: 40/40
MP: 20/20
Stamina: 20/20
STR: 3
DEX: 4
CON: 4

INT: 4
WIS: 4
Skills:
Baker - Common
Consume - Rare
*****
Max felt his chest suddenly become lighter than he could believe as he stared at the small status window he had summoned. It had been unlocked since he was thirteen, but nothing had ever shown up before besides the first two lines.
Now, there were two skills listed! [Baker] and something else he had never heard of.
What in the world is consume? Is that a skill to help him test food?
Smiling, he considered how cool that would be if it helped him grow as a renowned tester of some kind.
The sound of fingers snapping broke his shock as he saw old, spindly fingers before his face.
“What skill does it say!” the man exclaimed louder as he waved a hand at those behind him.
“Uh… it says…” Max trailed off as he watched the people moving toward him.
Max couldn’t speak as his voice failed him. His mind was racing, and things were moving so fast. Why were those four coming near him? That only happened when things were bad.
The man's face contorted, and he shook his head from side to side. Motioning to a woman standing behind him, he whispered in her ear.
Glancing around the courtyard, Max realized everyone was staring at him and that his mother was crying. His dad was holding her back as she reached her hands out toward him and wept.
His sister’s face was white as snow as she stared at him. Glancing next to her, he noticed that Nancy was not there. The basket she had been holding was upside down on the street, and some muffins that he loved were crushed under the feet of those near it.
Scanning the crowd, he saw a patch of red hair bobbing and weaving through the crowd, leaving the street.
Turning around, he saw Caleb looking at him with tears in his eyes.
“What is wrong?” Max asked Caleb as his friend pointed behind him.
“Unskilled! Unskilled!” The cry rose from the crowd, and Max turned around, confused as to why they would say that. As he turned, he saw the four people behind the older man moving toward him.
“Unskilled! Unskilled!” the cry echoed again all around him.

“Do not resist, and they will not strike you down before your family,” the older man stated as the men and women surrounded him. “If you fight, your family may die as well.”
Glancing at the older man, Max saw rage and anger burning in his eyes. It was like he had done something evil to this man every day of his life to earn a look like this.
Looking at the other four, he saw they each wore the same expression as the two on his side grabbed his arm and yanked him in the direction away from the crowd, his family, and friends.
“Why?” Max shouted at the four who were dragging him away. “I have a skill! Why…”
A fist, harder than any blow he had ever received, hit his jaw, causing his knees to buckle, and the world began to shimmer.
The woman who had struck him spoke in a hushed tone as they yanked him along.
“Put him in the cart, and we will deal with him once we are gone.”
The cart she was talking about was not that far away, and before they had thrown him into it, he was already lost to the looming darkness that beckoned him.

PAT 2 **Ultimate Level 1 - Chapter 002 - Cost of freedom**

https://www.patreon.com/posts/ultimate-level-1-91771946 2023-10-27

Max realized his pants were wet and he couldn’t figure out why for a moment. There was a copper taste in his mouth also. Trying to move and figure out what was happening sent him into a state of panic as his heart started to thump in his chest. It was impossible as he found his hands tied behind his back.
Even with his eyes open, there was no light around him.
His heart pounded as if he were a deer fleeing a wolf, causing a slight dizziness that only cleared when he recalled getting a jaw-smacking from some woman.
I’m going to die. I’m really going to die!
His brain hurt, unsure if it was because of the punch he had received or his situation.

Why are they going to kill me? I have a skill! Two skills, and yet they said I didn't have one!

He tried to kick his feet and found that they were bound together. The rope was cutting into his wrists and hands. His feet were numb from how tight they had tied him up.

Rolling over, he remembered the cart they were taking him toward. One with a solid wooden door.

How long had he been out? That would be important to know. The warmness of his pants told him it couldn't have been too long.

Rolling onto his back, Max took a few deep breaths.

Think!

"I always say I'm the wisest. Now prove it," he told himself as he noticed a small sliver of light from the keyhole in the door.

The thought of rolling around and seeing if something was inside here seemed foolish. Why would they put him in here if he could escape?

Closing his eyes, Max recalled seeing a similar cart a few years ago. Someone else had been branded as unskilled, and they promptly carried that young woman away. They must have put her inside like they had him.

"Those bastards are prepared for someone like me!" he cursed as he slammed his boots into the floor.

As the pain of wooden planks reverberated through his heels, he felt pressure against his ankle and calf.

His heart began racing when Max realized they had missed his knife when tying him up.

Bringing his heels toward his hands that were tied behind him, Max struggled and groaned at the pain he felt as the rope bit into him, causing his skin to tear and wetness to run down his hand.

"Goblin nutts," he cursed as he reached for the cuff of his boots that was covered by his pants. Slowly, he pulled the pant leg up and felt the bare skin.

He yelped suddenly and thrust his leg out as a cramp in his hamstring took over from his awkward position.

Groaning and grunting, he tried to ignore it. Every time he pulled his leg close, it started to flare up again.

"Push through it, you pansy," he muttered aloud as he fought the pain. His leg twitched as he moved his feet close to him again.

His skinny legs and arms provided him an advantage here. He was flexible compared to Caleb and others. The joy of not having huge muscles on his short frame was that he didn't have as far to reach. Sure, everyone wanted to be tall, even if he wanted to be tall, but right now, being short was working out for him.

His fingers fumbled on the handle, and after a few failed attempts, he managed to grasp it between his two fingers, freeing it from its sheath. It slipped from his fingers, landing on the floor.
Letting out the breath he had been holding, Max relaxed and felt his leg stop spasming as he straightened it.
All he could imagine was cutting himself, slicing off a finger, or slitting his wrist in the darkness on his blade. It was sharp. He and Caleb spent more time sharpening their knives than they ever used them. He could shave with it… if he could actually grow facial hair.
Carefully, he grabbed the small handle and flipped it around, pressing the blade against one of the rope pieces, and began sliding it back and forth.
Over and over, his hands barely seemed to move, yet he felt it cutting through threads, pieces of the rope flaking off onto his slick fingers.

After what seemed like forever, he felt the rope loosen up. Twisting his wrist, he felt it starting to fall away. Gently setting the knife down, he squirmed his hands as the loop suddenly came undone, letting him escape the bonds.
When Max brought his arms forward, his shoulders lit up like fire ants were biting him. All that time in that position had caused them to lock up. Even his hands tingled from the lack of blood flowing through them.
Feeling the knot near where he had cut, he realized he had gotten lucky. He had managed to cut through the central strand that held it together. Slipping the other hand out, he found his knife in the dark and repeated the process for his legs.
In another minute, they were free, and his toes and feet felt like pins and needles as blood flowed back into them.
Climbing to his knee, he put his eye on the keyhole and tried to look out of it. Across the courtyard were at least another fifty kids still waiting in line. It appeared that they must have taken a break after they had taken him away. With a town this size, it wasn’t uncommon for two to three hundred eighteen-year-olds to line up. A town of ten thousand, including the surrounding farms and other areas, was a big draw for the adventurers guild.
Moving his head around the keyhole, he saw that no one was paying any attention to the cart down the street from the courtyard. He actually didn’t hear anyone nearby.
Taking his knife, Max began to whittle on the area where the lock was. Thankfully, it was a simple keyhole lock, not a padlock.

He scraped and cut in the dark, sending slivers of wood to the floor in the dark. Without light, the only thing he could go off of was feeling. There was no telling how thick the doors were, but he doubted he could kick the cart open, and doing so would probably draw attention he didn't want.
Time felt like it was racing by as he sliced and cut wood away in slivers and chunks.
Stopping occasionally and looking out the keyhole, he saw the progression of people moving at a fair pace. The shouting and cheers that took place each time someone got their skill gave him a running total of the number of people left.
There were less than twenty-five now, and he wasn't even halfway through. He felt the knife hitting the metal bolt as he kept cutting on the top and bottom of it.
Memories flooded his brain as he tried to remember what he had ignored learning at the blacksmith shop when he was supposed to be training.
"Gah, I'm an idiot," he cursed as a spec of wood flew out and smacked him near his eye. "I should have paid more attention; maybe I wouldn't have been in this mess!"
Like a caged animal, he panicked with every cheer that echoed through the city.
Fifteen… there were only fifteen or so more people left to get their skills.
There would be a speech, probably not long because of him, and then they would say goodbye to the mayor, collect the shard, and leave the town for a year.
Frantic, he jabbed his knife at the wood, trying to remove bigger sections of it. The sliding back and forth was taking less out since it was already working through a two-inch hole.
His knife's sound when it hit the metal bar in the hole and the snap brought him to tears.
That mistake had turned the three-inch blade into a one-inch blade and was worthless at this point.
Sobbing, he dropped it, pounding his fists against the door.
He wailed and pounded on it, not caring if anyone heard him.

"Max! Can you hear me, Max?!"
Jerking himself back, he recognized that voice.
"Caleb?!"
The side of the wagon on his right tapped three times.
"I'm here, and so is your sister. We are going to try and get you out!"

Overcome with joy, Max pressed against the door and banged on it a few times.
“I broke my knife! I took out half of the wood!”
He heard some scraping and groaning on the door's other side. Peering through the keyhole, he saw his friend's blond hair matted to his head. Occasionally, his sister's brown hair flew by the hole when Caleb’s head moved out of the way for a second.
“Stand back a moment!” Caleb cried out. “We are going to try and time the next shout and pop this open.”
Moving back a few feet, Max prayed for a moment before stopping.
Why would I pray if you didn’t listen to me at any other time?! If you can’t get me out of this mess now, you can kiss your promise of riches and dedication goodbye!
Giving the middle finger to the ceiling of his prison, Max watched and waited as he heard the door creak for a moment.
When a cheer echoed through town, a snapping sound came from the door. He started to move toward it until he heard his sister call out.
“Wait! Not yet! One more big push!”
Putting a finger in his mouth to bite his nail, a habit he wished he had been able to overcome by now, Max tasted the dried blood on his hand from where he had ripped the skin on his wrists.
He knew another round of applause should come soon, and when it did, he heard a solid crack and saw light appear where the lock was before the door opened.
Shielding his eyes from the brightness outside, he squinted and saw his friend and sister.
Their eyes were wide in terror, but they were committed.
“Come on, we gotta go! There are only four more left!”
Nodding at Caleb, he moved to the edge and slid out of the wagon. Landing on the ground sent him to his knees as his sister shut the door over him.
“Get up!” Caleb ordered as he grabbed his shoulder and arm, pulling him to his feet.
They ducked around the side of the wagon and began running through town. After passing a few streets, Max tried to slow down, but both motioned for him to keep running with them.

A dozen streets passed. They were sweating, breathing hard, their clothes matted to their bodies. His sister's dress clung to her like a glove, and Max noticed Caleb averting his eyes.
“Here,” his sister said as she pointed to an alley ahead.
Ducking into it, they all leaned against the stone walls of the buildings, ignoring the boxes, barrels, and trash.

A loud applause echoed through the city; they all knew what that meant.
“It’s over. We need to go.”
Caleb’s voice was unusually quiet as he said those words. He moved to a box and pulled out a small pack.
“Here,” he said as he shoved them into Max’s hand. “You’ll need this. Run and try to make it to the next city. If you stay here, you know what will happen.”
His chest hurt, not from the running but from what he saw on his childhood friend's face, and then he noticed his sister had the same look on hers.
“We can’t help anymore,” she whispered. “Mom and Dad don’t know what we have done, but there will be questions. We need to move fast if we are going to be safe. Go, brother! I love you!”
She dashed forward, hugging him tightly before pulling back and nodding at Caleb.
“I’ll watch over her and your parents, but you must run. Don’t stop till you reach the forest!”
Caleb didn’t wait for him to respond. There were tears in his eyes, and even though Max wanted to run after them both and tell them to wait, he knew that moment wasn’t possible.
The only chance he had right now was getting out of town and somewhere he could camp for the night.
He threw the pack over his shoulder and wiped his cheeks once with his arm.
Whatever I need to do, I’ll make sure to figure out why they did this to me.
Looking up at the sky as he ran, he grunted.
“I guess I owe someone up there something. Help me find a way to be able to come back home, and I’ll do anything you ask.”

PAT 3 **Ultimate Level 1 - Chapter 003 - The other skill**

https://www.patreon.com/posts/ultimate-level-1-91772102 2023-10-27

Max’s legs burned as he ran past through the last few farms toward the safety of the trees.

Fear kept him. Never stopped, always moving, even if, at times, he had to walk.

Every step for the last few miles had been filled with pain in his legs and chest. The exhaustion he felt was overwhelming, but worse was the realization that everything he had dreamed of was gone.

I have [Baker]! Why couldn’t they just let me live with my parents? Why were they going to take me away?

None of it made sense as he weighed those questions. Worse was the question he really didn't want to think about.

Do they just kill people who are like him?

Suddenly, his legs seized up mid-stride, and his body shook.

“Mother-loving goblin crap!”

The pain he felt when he realized what had happened left him even more breathless.

[Stamina Check]

*****

Stamina: 0/20

*****

Lurching to a stop, Max bent over, resting his hands on his thighs.

Damn chicken legs!

His constant lack of avoiding physical work had not provided him with a body with a lot of meat on it. Even his sister had more muscle than he did.

Stopping for a few minutes, Max looked around before he began walking slowly, letting his stamina recover a few points. The non-stop running had drained his stamina faster than he remembered.

Thankfully, no one was around here to see him walking around like a gimp. Everyone that was physically able to go had gone into town to watch the ceremony. That fact now panged his heart as he realized everyone in his hometown believed he was unskilled and had escaped.

Panic took over, and all he could think about was getting deep enough into the woods and getting a fire going. He still needed to see what was in the pack his sister and Caleb had given him. Then, he would have to figure out where to go.

Trudging through the fields, his mind reminded him that he was headed in no particular direction.

I'm such an idiot for not paying more attention in class. I have no clue which way I should even head.

Max knew there were major towns in all four directions, with smaller villages as well, but which one was the best to choose?

He was simply running southwest, away from his parent's place, as he figured they would check there first. Actually, he had run this way because Caleb and his sister had led him this way in town, no doubt having thought about that ahead of time.

Nearing the trees, he slowed down once more as he glanced at the sun overhead.

There were three hours, maybe four tops, before the sun would set.

The woods were still sparse but would soon be thick and block out all of the light the sun provided. He felt the dryness of his throat and could not swallow his fear. Dropping his pack, he looked to see what they had actually given him.

Bread, cheese, dried meat, a knife, a water skin!

Yanking it from the sack, he began gulping down the water, almost choking on it before slowing down. After a few more swallows, he put the stopper back in the skin and returned it back in the pack.

Pulling the knife out, he noticed it was the one Caleb had always carried on his hip when they were exploring. Eight inches long, it was more for cutting meat or skinning an animal than the one they had used for whittling.

Holding it tight in his hand it made him feel better.

Safer.

Not that he was good with a bow or a sword, but Max wished for a longer, more powerful weapon as he stared at the trees and the way the light seemed to vanish under them.

Am I trading death at the hands of the people in town for mutilation by some creature or animal?

A shiver ran through him as he took a deep breath and let it out.

He had butchered sheep and other animals in his life and even managed to kill a few deer and a single boar while hunting.

I need reach. Something longer…

Focusing his mind on the task ahead, he forged a path through the trees, doing his best to leave as little of a trail as possible.

A good thirty minutes later, he found himself drenched in sweat again but had found a spot deep enough in the woods that he felt he could safely build a fire and not worry about the light of it being visible from the road or fields.

The sunlight barely broke through the canopy of leaves, and the forest's darkness felt heavy against him. Thick wooden branches with large leaves covered the sky, and gnarled roots created a ground filled with tripping hazards.

He had found a sapling that felt strong enough and was the length he desired for a makeshift spear. Hacking off all the branches and peeling off the bark, he sat down and skinned it, creating a sharpened point.

The greatest treasure in the pack had been some flint. Caleb remembered he had never been successful at starting a fire without one.

The pile of tinder was ready, and stacked near it were smaller branches and a few larger sticks to help get it going when he would finally light it. With those two tasks done, he began building a

barrier to help protect him from more than one side, searching for logs and other large rocks to stack.

As he moved a smaller log, a three-foot green snake, a slickback, slithered out from the log and began to hiss at him. Jumping back, he grabbed his spear from the ground and stabbed at it, missing it the first time. It took two more stabs before he managed to pin it in the dirt.

With its body immobilized, he slowly slid his hand down the shaft of his spear and pulled out the knife, hacking the head off in one swing.

A weird, cold sensation filled him when he killed the snake.

[5 Hitpoints Consumed]

He felt his eyes widen when he saw the notification.

Max quickly checked to see what had happened.

[Status Check]

*****

Max Hoste

18-Year-old Human Male

Level 1

Exp 0/1000

HP: 27/40

MP: 20/20

Stamina: 20/20

STR: 3

DEX: 4

CON: 4

INT: 4

WIS: 4

Skills:

Baking - Common

Consume - Rare

*****

I gained five hit points by killing the snake. Why would I gain health like that?

A moment passed as he realized what had happened.

Isn't consume an eating skill? Or is it more…

A flood of thoughts and questions assaulted his brain as he considered what that meant. No experience was gained, which was weird. He knew people gained experience in different ways either by killing creatures or monsters, completing quests, and other tasks. He should have at least gotten one point of exp.

Too tired to focus on that right now and needing to finish up before the light of the day faded completely, Max returned to the other task at hand.

When the sun had finally set and having sat in the darkness, letting his eyes adjust, Max slowly worked his tinder and flint, getting a fire going in no time. As it grew, he added just enough logs to keep it lit without making a bonfire that would signal where he was.

A sigh escaped his lips as he sat there cooking the snake he had slain with nothing more than a stick running through it and a fire.

"What I wouldn't give for some seasoning and fresh herbs," he muttered as he listened to the meat pop and sizzle. The [Baker] skill in him yearned for so many different ways to make this snake taste better. Knowledge he shouldn't know but somehow did. Lessons he had learned during the time spent with Nancy and the other bakers came to his mind.

It felt like he was being cheated. He had gotten the skill he had wanted, but how did he get two skills? He wasn't a noble. And why had that older man been so upset when he saw that he had two skills?

Touching it with his fingers, he shook them from the slight burn he felt on his fingertips.

Lost in thought about his skill was making him make mistakes he knew he shouldn’t be making.

Even without the [Baker] class, one knew the basics of cooking, and putting one's fingers on freshly cooked meat was not smart.

Waving the stick in the air, he hissed before sucking on the tip of his fingers.

“Focus, you idiot!” he chided himself as he closed his eyes a moment and took a deep breath.

Blowing on his dinner, he glanced at the area around him. The woods were darker than he had imagined, and he knew he needed to make a decision.

The barrier he built wasn’t that tall, and the realization that he was deep in the woods with no one to help him left a bad taste in his mouth, and he had yet to even eat the unseasoned snake.

Glancing up at the tree, he knew his options were to sleep on the ground or in the tree. It would be a better night's rest on the ground, but anything could come up to him while he slept and easily kill him.

The tree would be a little more dangerous if he fell and not be near as comfortable, but it would be safer except for the bugs.

Lost in thought, he took a bite of the snake and immediately began sucking in air to help with the pain of the hot, juice-flowing heat burning his tongue.

Chewing fast while inhaling, he gulped down the piece of meat and felt the burn go all the way down his throat.

Closing his eyes, Max was overwhelmed.

Today had gone nothing like he had planned. Everything he had hoped for and bet on was crushed like those muffins on the street.

It was all due to the second skill he had been given.

Sitting on the ground, leaning against a small log, feeling the pain in his mouth from the burning flesh he had swallowed, his brain finally reminded him of something he had forgotten.

[Skill Description - Consume]

*****

Consume - Rare Skill: When killing a person, creature, or monster, the skill holder has a chance to consume some of the essence of the one defeated. Health, Stamina, Mana, Stats, and Skills have a chance of being gained. Stats consumed cannot be acquired if current stats are higher. Skills can be upgraded if a higher skill is consumed. The owner of this skill cannot gain any experience. No experience may be gained by killing creatures or others.

*****

Max shook his head a few times, unable to believe what he was reading.

He had a rare skill! Only nobles and heroes ever got rare skills without leveling. How could that happen? Surely, the adventure guild advisors would change their minds if that were the case!

As he began celebrating for a moment, his brain considered what he had just read again.

It sounded overpowered and weak at the same time. He couldn’t gain experience by killing monsters like a normal adventurer. There was no way for him to rank up. Even if he joined the adventurer guild, how could he improve?

Blowing on his snake dinner, he tested it this time carefully with his fingers and realized it was finally cool enough for him to eat without suffering pain and injury.

As he gobbled it down like a starving piglet, he returned to the description again.

Health, Stats, and Skills have a chance of being gained.

That must have been how he gained those hit points when he killed the snake!

Fighting will give me a chance to get stronger even if I can't gain levels!

"But that means I have to fight things stronger than me…" he stated out loud between bites.

Swallowing the mouthful he was chewing, he realized he was stuck on a path he didn't like.

He had to fight to get stronger and hopefully be able to find a way to live safely somewhere else, or he would die to those hunting him or a creature.

Groaning, he finished the last bite of his snake, tossed the stick in the fire, laid back against the log, and played with the spear in his hand.

The choices before him were *easy*.

Get stronger or die.

Rising to his feet, he tossed two logs into the fire and looked up at the tree branches.

Getting stronger could start tomorrow. Tonight, he wanted to sleep and not have to worry about dying.

PAT 4 **Ultimate Level 1 - Chapter 004 - The art of combat or lack there of** https://www.patreon.com/posts/ultimate-level-1-91772391 2023-10-27

The sound of something beneath him woke Max up. Noises and grunts were coming from under him.

Trying not to fall out of the tree Max was sleeping in, he leaned his head over and saw two goblins examining the camp he had created, scratching around the log and sniffing for him. The smoke hid his scent as the two of them padded around the fire.
Their green skin looked waxy and dirty in the dying light, almost like they rolled in the soil for fun. It had to have been a few hours as the last two logs he had put in before climbing into the tree were mostly gone, and deep red embers were burning hot.
Max glanced at his pack, which he had tied around the branch near him, and felt relief that he had not left it on the ground. If he had done that, he knew they would be ransacking it and eating the food he had left in it.
Both goblins were talking in whatever clacking and screeching noise that they had. They were wearing ratty and dirt-covered clothes; each had a stick with a sharp end like the one he had up in the tree with him.
While he wasn't the tallest guy, they had to be at least a foot shorter than him.
One screeched and pointed in the direction Max had entered the woods from. The one being screeched at waved his hands and said something back, but the other pointed his stick at him and then at the trail Max had arrived on.
It grunted, receiving a louder growl in return before it turned and started down the path, quietly moving out of the dim light and into the darkness.
Max could barely hear the sound of the creature as it disappeared into the trees.
The other goblin turned and stared at the fire, leaning his spear against the log and holding his green, bony hands toward the fire.
Watching the goblin as it stood there, glancing around the forest occasionally while seemingly enjoying the fire, Max considered the opportunity beneath him.
Goblins weren't the greatest fighters, but neither was he. However, there was one by himself with no weapon in his hand. There was no telling how long it might be before his friend would return.
Think of this like a game of tag. I'm just playing tag where if I lose, I die.
Shaking his head, Max tried to breathe quietly as his heart pounded like a hammer on an anvil in his chest. He was really considering doing something stupid!
Get stronger or die, you pansy!
Wishing he could slap himself, but knowing that would give his position away, Max didn't have much time to decide. The other

goblin could be back at any moment, and two versus one was not a position he wanted to be in.
He let his brain consider the plan in his head. He wasn't the strongest, but he was smarter than most of the other kids he had grown up with. He could move a few steps to the right in the tree and use his spear and height to pin and strike down the goblin in one blow.
It sounded good in his head, but he knew this could go wrong in so many ways. He would be trapped in the tree if he gave away his position. If he missed, he could find himself on the wrong end of the stick. Literally.
If I screw this up, I'm going to be dinner for both of these goblins…
His hand brushed the knife at his waist, and suddenly, he felt like he wasn't alone. His sister and best friend had risked their lives to free him and give him a chance to live. That meant he would have to do something his sister and Caleb wouldn't hesitate to do.
Slowly swinging his leg over the branch he was sitting on, Max believed the pounding of his heart would make a noise that would alert the goblin, who had decided to sit on the ground and relax even more.
Resisting the urge to chuckle, Max saw the goblin's head starting to bob and sent a prayer to whatever god must have given him this gift.
I owe someone up there. I'm not sure who, but if I come out of this with my life, I'll find a way to make it up to you.
Having prayed to the gods and knowing the foolishness of what he was about to do, Max managed to get both his feet on one branch and positioned his body with the weight on his soles.
Taking a few more breaths, his hands grabbed the spear that was resting on a few branches as he tried to swing it around slowly.
Sweat was beading up on his forehead, and his hands felt like rivers of sweat, gushing across his body and ready to strip away his grip on the wood. Thankful that he had stripped off the bark, the sticky sap of the spear kept it from slipping out of his hands when he almost lost his balance for a second.
Eyes wide, he glanced down at the goblin who was not paying any attention, its head bent over and a slight snoring sound coming from it.
As he prepared to jump, a thought tickled his brain.
[HP Status Check]
*****
HP: 33/40
*****
I'm still not full health…

Shaking his head to clear that loss of focus, he gazed down at the goblin once more.
Finally freeing his spear and getting it turned around so the tip pointed at the sleeping green goblin, he took one last breath and gripped the shaft with both hands.
Now or never. Time to nut up like Caleb always says…
Pushing a little from his feet, he felt the drop take him down faster than he had planned.
His aim was off from where he had aimed, and before he could correct it, instead of planting the spear in the goblin's back as he had hoped, the shaft plunged through its right arm and pierced its leg, impaling in the ground.
A scream and screech erupted as the goblin's head snapped up while Max fell to the side, fingers sliding down the shaft before tumbling forward and smacking into the goblin’s lifted skull with his head.
Dazed and seeing stars for a second, Max staggered back and saw the goblin reaching up to its forehead with one hand while trying to figure out why its other arm and leg weren’t working.
Its yellow eyes glowed in the light of the dying campfire, and the smell that came from its tooth-filled mouth almost made him gag. It was like someone had taken spoiled milk and rotten meat and gargled with it.
Finding himself on his butt, he fumbled with the dagger on his waist. His sweaty hands were not helping him keep hold of the wooden handle as he ripped it from the sheath, and it fell to the ground.
The goblin tried to swipe at him as it screamed in pain, but the spear blocked its own attack when its arm hit the wooden stick stuck in the ground. It whined as the force caused it to tear open a larger hole in its leg, revealing a bone that had been snapped.
Concentrating, Max finally found the dagger in his hands and started slicing wildly at the injured goblin.
As it held up its hand and arm, the knife sent chunks of fingers and flesh flying everywhere, spraying blood on himself and the goblin, who was struggling to fight back.
Sounds of screeching came from the direction the other had run, and Max knew he had to hurry.
His heart pounded, and even though his hands shook, he charged and drove the knife into the goblin’s chest, watching it shudder for a moment before its head rolled back.
Yanking the dagger back, he felt a similar sensation wash over him.
[9 Hit Points Consumed]
[1 Strength Consumed]

Max felt recharged and rejuvenated. It was like a cold bucket of water had been dumped over him. His lack of sleep and discomfort were gone at that moment.
Did I really…
His random thought stopped as he heard the snapping of branches and turned in time to see a goblin charging at him with its stick pointing out toward him.
Max stumbled to the side. The goblin adjusted slightly as its wooden spear caught his left arm and pierced it partly, ripping through the outer part of his tricep.
Pain racked him, but he gritted his teeth as the goblin flew past him and into the wall he had built behind the fire.
Spinning around, he lunged back at the goblin as its spear snapped when it hit the log barrier he had built. It stumbled from the impact, dazed from crashing into the wall Max had built.
There was no skill or technique, just fear-driven strikes with every ounce of strength he had.
Max charged the goblin, lifting the knife he held in his right hand.
Screeching and cries rang out as the goblin arched its chest up, suffering from an eight-inch blade that pierced its entire body multiple times. In seconds, the fight was over the goblin fell forward, landing limply on the wooden trunks and not moving.
The cold sensation struck Max again.
[15 Hitpoints Consumed]
His left arm tingled and felt warm and cold all at the same time.
Glancing at it, he saw in the dim light that his fancy shirt was torn and covered in blood, but when he looked inside the hole in his sleeve, the injury he had just suffered was gone.
Spinning around, Max scanned the area and listened to see if anything else was coming.
When no sounds were made other than his heart, which felt like it would burst, he let out the breath he had been holding and glanced around.
He needed light.
Tossing a few more logs on the fire, he took the broken shaft of the goblin’s spear and used it to fan the embers.
Soon, flames engulfed the dry logs he had put on the fire, and he held his left arm closer to it. Wiping the wet blood off his skin, his eyes couldn’t believe what he saw. There was no scar on him where the spear had struck him. He could have bled out, but yet he was perfectly fine.
He was better than fine!
[Status Check]
*****

Max Hoste
18-Year-old Human Male
Level 1
Exp 0/1000
HP: 40/40
MP: 20/20
Stamina: 20/20
STR: 4
DEX: 4
CON: 4
INT: 4
WIS: 4
Skills:
Baking - Common
Consume - Rare
*****
Smacking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, Max stared at his stats.
His strength had gone up!
His skill had not only healed his arm by somehow stealing the life of the goblins, but it had also managed to give him a point of strength!
A tremor ran through him, and for the first time in his life, he felt a peace he had never felt before wash over him.
All his life, he had been afraid of pain and of how hard it would be to be an adventurer. The stories he had heard in town were always the rose-colored ones. Everything seemed grand, even in defeat.
Yet when he was nine, an old adventurer had come into town for a year. He was missing part of a leg and an eye and had told him the true woes of adventuring. Those stories had scared him for so long when the man had talked about how most of his squad had died, and the scars he wore were a testament to how he barely lived.
Yet with a skill like his… he could get the strength he needed and perhaps one day return home.
He could get revenge on those who had tried to kill him and find out why they had done this.

PAT 5 **Ultimate Level 1 - Chapter 005 - The real power of consume**

https://www.patreon.com/posts/ultimate-level-1-91772670 2023-10-27

Max climbed back into the tree after removing his spear from the goblin he had stuck it with. Burning the blood off had also reminded him to burn the spear's tip, helping to harden it. He had forgotten that trick one of the older trainers had mentioned years ago.

Once the sun was up, he threw dirt over the fire until it was out and made sure it didn’t smoke. He did not want anyone to know he had been there.

Stretching, Max was in awe that he wasn’t as sore or stiff as he thought he might be.

After the point of strength he had gained, his body felt not just stronger but better, and he started to whistle as he prepared to head out until he remembered that he was trying to be stealthy.

Moving slowly back toward the thinner part of the woods, Max remembered there might be people looking for him. They might be searching the countryside or think he was hiding somewhere in town, waiting for them to leave.

Getting far from here as fast as possible was the best choice, so he grabbed his spear and the small one the first goblin had set down before heading off to find some water, as his skin was almost empty.

A few hours had passed as he navigated the treeline, keeping an eye on the fields off to the northwest and making sure to stay on the lookout for people. The hours dragged on, and the sun continued to climb high into the sky, leaving him thirsty as finished off the last bit of water in his skin. There was a stream in the direction to the southwest, but it would probably be a few more hours before he actually made it there at this pace. Cutting up

some of the cheese and meat as he walked, he had to eat it slowly as the dry mouth he had made chewing difficult.

“Water… it’s always something simple that gets you,” he grumbled, thinking about how far he had gone. Thirteen? Twelve? He had traveled far. The first real village should be within a day’s reach if he kept going in the same direction.

Lost in his thoughts and his concern over how dry his throat was, Max paused in shock as he heard barking off in the distance, coming from the direction he was headed.

He stopped and bolted deeper into the trees. Needing some time to think, he sunk behind a large trunk. There would be some small villages and even the occasional houses out here where people worked the land. A dog barking could mean almost anything. It sounded somewhat familiar, but he couldn’t figure out why right now.

Listening carefully, he knew the sound came from the direction he needed to go.

I’m going to regret this…

Slowly, he made his way through the forest, stopping and waiting each time the barking stopped for a minute before it started up again. Trees were about ten feet apart, the trunks thick enough to obscure his line of sight, making it impossible to see far ahead. Even with the sun at its peak height, the canopy kept where he was decently dark as he slinked through the shadows.

After about twenty solid minutes of doing his best to remain hidden and not be seen or heard, the source of barking was only a good fifty yards or so ahead.

The barking sounded deeper and very familiar now. As he crept closer, the sweat building on his palms made him begin to second-guess his attempt to find out what was going on.

I swear someday, I will find a healing potion for this problem.

Slowly, he made it up to a few more trees and shook his head in frustration when he saw a brown sheepdog barking at a sheep tangled in a bush.

A groan escaped his lips as he knew what this meant. At some point, someone would come looking for the dog and the sheep. Backing up and skirting around the trees, Max didn't want to deal with people. He had no idea how quickly news might be spreading about him, and if anyone learned his description and shared it, they would be on his trail faster than he could imagine.

Moving back into the deeper part of the forest, he began heading to the south, trying to judge where he was going by the sound of the dog barking.

After about ten minutes of making his way through the trees, the sound of the barking changed. It was different than the usual, "*hey, I'm here, come and find this stupid sheep*." It sounded more like a threat had emerged.

He wanted to ignore it and keep moving, but he knew the cost of sheep and a well-trained dog. If something threatened the sheep, the dog would risk his own life to protect it.

Moving back toward the direction he knew the dog was in, he began to jog, dodging the roots and trees as he darted through the forest.

The sound abruptly changed, and a yelp and whine sounded as he drew closer. He was still a good minute from where it was, but he knew there was no turning back now. He had raised too many dogs over his life just to let one be hurt.

Sprinting, he flew past trees, and he heard the whine of the injured canine.

Mother-loving goblins...

He made it far enough into the trees to see two goblins poking at it, pushing it away from the sheep, while a third one posed ready for the kill.

The two pushing it away had spears similar to his own, but the third one carried a short sword. The goblin with the sword was limped from a bite Max saw on its calf.

None of them were paying any attention to his position, as the dog and the sheep had their full attention.

His heart raced. Wolves, coyotes, goblins, and other creatures often bothered [Shepherds], terrorizing their flocks. His dad had to hire [Scouts] on a regular basis to track and help hunt those things that terrorized their flocks.

Without hesitation, he targeted the one with the sword. It was the closest, and Max did not want to be pinched between the three of them. As he drew near the goblin, he dropped the shorter spear to the dirt and held his with both hands, clinching it so tight his fingers turned white.

The barking and bleating hid his footsteps as he came up behind the goblin, ramming his spear through its back in a surprise attack.

It let out a shriek before dropping its sword and stumbling forward, yanking Max’s spear from his hand.

The other two turned at their companion’s cry, and Max darted forward to where the goblin he had impaled was, putting his foot on its back and yanking his spear from its body. As he did it fell toward the ground, groaning and gasping as blood flowed everywhere.

The other goblins stopped in shock before screeching wildly and moving with their sticks pointed at him.

His spear was longer, but there were two of them.

Whistling, he backed up and he brandished his spear against the goblins, waiting for them to close the gap.

As they came, he saw one of them move to the left a little to try and get around him.

His brain screamed back to one of the training drills he had watched Caleb do, and knew he would lose for sure if they managed that.

The moment one of the goblins committed to move left, Max rushed forward at the one on the right, using his range to spear it in the chest.

He watched as the hardened black and red shaft pierced the skin of its chest, cracking its bones and sending it backward.

Yanking his spear back out, he swung his spear toward the one on the left who was lunging at him now.

The goblin somehow dodged to the side, using its spear to shift the impact of his swing, and stuck its spear into his thigh.

Stumbling, Max pitched forward as the goblin yanked its tip free and prepared to stab at him again.

Time seemed to slow down as Max realized he might have overplayed his own view of himself and this skill. He had forgotten that he really wasn't that strong. He was average, but his early success had led him to be overconfident.

Trying to push off with his injured leg, he felt it fold under him, pain lancing through his body.

The goblin cackled and moved back, lifting its spear up as it prepared to spear him again when it suddenly screeched out in pain.

Max saw that the dog had come up behind and bit it on the back of its leg, ripping off a large piece of its calf.

It snarled and tried to whip itself around but stumbled, having lost the ability to stand on its injured leg.

Using his spear to lean on while balancing on his right leg, Max clenched his teeth as he watched the goblin flail on the ground.

Suddenly, a cold and familiar sensation hit him.

[15 Hit Points Consumed]

The pain in his leg almost disappeared completely, and he stood right up. He could barely stand a moment ago, and now he only had a slight twinge of pain when he moved.

Glancing at the one he had impaled in the chest, it was still moving, blood gurgling from its mouth and chest.

It must have been the sword one that just died.

Grinning, he felt that same calm that he had the last time he had killed a goblin. Fear was gone now, and he held his spear out as he moved in to finish off the last one.

The goblin shrieked as the dog barked near its head, sensing the change in battle. The dog drew its attention. It flailed its green arms and hands around, waving the stick as best it could, trying to keep it away.

Max swiped his spear when the goblin stick got near him, smacking it free from its hand.

With glee, he moved as he slammed the tip into the chest of the goblin, watching it spasm for a moment.

[7 Hit Points Consumed]

When the cold sensation filled, he realized his leg was completely healed. No more pain came from where he had been stabbed.

Jumping up a few times, he found himself laughing as his leg felt as good as new. His pants were not as they were stained with red and a hole about a hand length from his crotch.

Glancing at the last goblin, he saw it spasming still. The other goblin had just died and now all he could do was wait for this one also. It took one last breath, blood leaking from its mouth and the hole he had made in its chest.

Max’s body jerked hard, his mind exploded, and he almost dropped the spear he was holding with a death-grip.

His eyes went wide when the notification flashed across his vision.

[Consume has successfully learned a skill]

[Would you like to learn [Warrior - Spear Handling]?]

[Yes / No]

Blinking his eyes, Max couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Could he really get a third skill?

PAT 6 **Ultimate Level 1 - Chapter 006 - It doesn't distinguish**

https://www.patreon.com/posts/ultimate-level-1-91772802 2023-10-27

[Consume has successfully learned a skill]

[Would you like to learn [Warrior - Spear Handling]?]

[Yes / No]

Without hesitating, Max chose yes, his brain surging with newfound knowledge on how to use a spear skillfully.

[Consume has learned Spear Handling - Common]

He was holding the wooden stick completely wrong, he realized. His hand positioning was off balance, and he was standing in such a way that no real power was being conferred from his hips.

His brain also told him how to bend his knees, as well as a few attack patterns and combos.

Things he had seen demonstrated once or twice years ago somehow felt like he had been practicing them for years.

Unable to resist, he grinned and had to check.

[Status Check]

*****

Max Hoste

18-Year-old Human Male

Level 1

Exp 0/1000

HP: 40/40

MP: 20/20

Stamina: 20/20

STR: 4

DEX: 4

CON: 4

INT: 4

WIS: 4

Skills:

Baking - Common

Consume - Rare

Warrior - Spear Handling - Common

*****

“Holy goblin nuts! Three fricking skills!”

Max was shocked. Standing there stunned for a moment, he heard a whine.

Spinning around, he saw the dog lying on its side, blood running down its front legs.

“It’s ok, boy, I’m here to help,” he stated in a low and calm voice as he moved to where the dog was lying. It was panting, and he could see the long gash on its body between its blood-matted fur. As gently as possible, he checked the cut and saw the entire length of its body was sliced open.

“How were you able to help me?” he whispered.

The dog whimpered, causing Max’s heart to twinge. There was no way he could help it. It would die soon.

Max rubbed its head, kneeling next to it, feeling the dog's life drain away. He would not have won this fight if it had attacked that goblin for him.

He wondered if he should find the owner. They would want their dog back even if he wasn’t alive.

I can’t… what if word has already spread about my escape… what if they turned me in…

He was torn between what he felt was right and the fear of what the advisors had tried to do to him.

Standing up, he began to slink away. As he moved, the dog whined, the sound of its pain crushing Max’s soul.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Max knew all he could do now was end the pain and suffering it was enduring. He couldn’t take it home. The risk was too great.

Tears were running down Max’s face as he watched the dog panting and its breathing change. Its whines were coming with every other breath.

Sliding his knife out of its sheath, he felt his hand trembling, causing the blade to shake in the air.

“I’m sorry, boy. I owe you my life. Let me help you end your pain.”

As he bent over and scratched between the dog's ears, he slowly moved the knife to where its heart would be.

With a quick thrust, he felt the dog jerk for a second and then go still, the knife having pierced its heart.

As the dog breathed its last breath, a shimmer of cold ran through Max.

[1 Dexterity Consumed]

“No! NO! NO! NO!” screamed Max as he glanced down at the beautiful dog he had just put down.

“That isn’t fair!”

Jumping to his feet, he threw the dagger on the ground and kicked the goblin corpse near him.

“I don’t want it from that!”

His hands shook, and he realized his chest was heaving with each breath that he took. His body felt alive, but his heart felt like it was broken in two.

What bastard of a skill takes something from a creature that protected me?!

Moving back to where the dog was, Max fell to his knees and began petting it.

The sun had moved a little when Max heard a whistle off in the distance.

Glancing down, he realized he had been petting the dog for a while.

Rising to his feet, he frowned, shaking his head at what he had done but knowing there had been no other choice.

He searched for his knife and found it lying in the shin-high grass after a moment. Wiping it off on one of the goblin's dirty clothes, he returned it to his sheath before grabbing his spear and turning to run towards the woods.

After a few steps, he stopped and glanced back at the corpses. He ran to where the one he had killed near the sheep was, causing the sheep to start baaing, and grabbed the small sword it had been carrying. Putting it in his pack, he quickly escaped into the trees, leaving the sheep in a state of panic.

He ran for a while until his heart and lungs began to burn, ignoring the fact he was about to run out of stamina. He didn’t want to, but he forced himself to stop. Being out here without stamina was foolish, and he didn’t want to waste that dog's sacrifice.

Slowing down, he began to breathe and tried to let his mind focus on something else.

His mind went back to the fact that he had just gained a skill. In a moment, he was considered just as rare as the noble boy who had acquired two skills a few days ago. That concept was hard to believe.

“Why the heck was I given this?” he asked, looking at the sky like he expected someone to answer.

Three main gods were believed to control the destiny destiny of all in this world. Phaius was the god who granted humans their skills. He was considered weak compared to the dwarf and elvish god.

Perhaps one of the lesser gods did this?

There were stories of heroes who had gained enough power to challenge gods and become one. The adventurers guild and the church declared that as heresy but…

What if a hero had some skill like mine…

Max wracked his brain, trying to remember the few times someone had been listed as unskilled and what had happened to them. He had never been close to the skill shard during those times. Families stood near it when their children were coming and moved out of the way so others could see and hear what their child was given.

Were others who had been called unskilled like me? Did they have the same skill or something similar?

Lost in his thoughts, he almost smacked into a tree and tripped on roots.

Glancing up at the sun, he realized he had about five or six hours before it would be down completely, and he was almost to the stream judging by the sound of rushing water.

Looking at his clothes, he realized he would need to dunk himself multiple times in the stream. He could smell the blood, piss, and sweat he was covered in.

The water was cold, and he knew it was clean enough to drink after tasting it. No sour taste meant it wouldn't be horrible to his body. He wasn't a survival expert like Caleb claimed to be.

Drinking till his throat no longer felt parched, Max filled up his water skin, preparing for what was coming next.

Taking his boots off, Max kept his clothes on and waded out into the water, doing the tippy-toe dance until it covered his waist. He let out a high-pitched *oooooooo*.

Knowing it was better to get this over, Max took a deep breath, plunging under the water. The cold water made him want to scream, yet he resisted that urge, forcing himself to stay submerged for a few more seconds.

Bursting to the water's surface, he gasped, wiping the water from his eyes as he turned back to the shore and exited the frigid stream as quickly as possible.

"I should have started a fire first," he said aloud, his teeth clattering against each other. The gentle breeze that blew did not help, but thankfully, the sun gave some warmth as he ripped off his pants and wrung them out quickly. Repeating the process with his shirt as he dressed while shaking like a mantis doing a mating dance, trying to ignore all the holes in his clothes.

With his boots on, he grabbed his pack and took off for the trees. One more night in the woods would be best before making his way over the bridge he would find downstream. He wasn't sure how far of a walk it would be, but he might die from the cold without a fire to warm up with.

Sitting on a log with nothing but his boots and underwear on, Max finally stopped shivering after about an hour. He had found a place for the night, built a fire, and lugged a few logs close to a tree like before. His new strength made things a lot easier to pick up and move.

Stacy and Caleb are both at least this strong… they easily moved things as big as those logs all the time.

Those thoughts helped Max ignore the truth that he was still struggling with. Someone must be looking for him. He needed to figure out how to get stronger and, at some point, would need to join the adventurers guild. Pulling out the sword he had taken from the goblin, he realized the quality sucked. There was rust and lots of nicks in the blade. It would still cut from the force of a swing, but how much he might get for it was questionable.

Spinning it in his hand a few times, he stood up and gave it a few swings. It felt awfully heavy and weird. His spear felt much better in his hands; if time allowed, he would make a new one in the coming days. He knew a few small changes in thickness and length would be better with the knowledge he now possessed with spears.

Touching his clothes that he had put on some stones near the fire, they were finally dry enough to wear. Once dressed, he ate half of the food he had left, filling his stomach, which had been grumbling for the last few hours. Now, with a full belly, he leaned back against a log and thought about what to do once in town.

“I need to shave my hair or get it dyed…” he muttered, running his fingers through it.

Coloring it would cost money, something he didn’t have. Shaving it off might look weird, but that would be the simplest answer. There would no doubt be people looking for him, and they knew what he looked like.

Pulling the knife from his belt, Max sighed as he tested the blade against his arm. It would leave a lot of cuts on his head, which might stand out even more. He would need to find a barber shop when he got into town.

Glancing down at his pants, Max groaned as he realized he would probably have to buy new clothes. Those things would eat up most of what he would get for the sword.

After getting set up in Windsor Wheel, a day's walk would take him to the Rumstant, a larger town to the southwest. It was far enough away that he should be able to get a new life setup.

Tapping his head with his finger, Max tried to remember what he had learned about adventurer quests. Some were gathering, and others were hunting.

“Goblin nuts!” he cursed when how an adventurer makes money popped into his head.

All those ears from the goblins he had killed were worth money. Had he cut them off and kept them, he could have turned them in at any town, earning coin and a reward.

Tossing a twig in the fire, Max groaned and picked up two more good-sized pieces of wood he had collected. Depositing them on glowing coals, he put his pack on and tossed his spear into the tree. It only took three tries this time for it to get stuck in the branches.

Smiling, he ran, jumped, grabbed a branch, and pulled himself up. These new stats of his were making life much easier. Ignoring that the sun was barely setting now, Max moved deftly through the tree and put his spear where he felt it would stay safely in the tree. Finding a forked set of branches, he settled in and closed his eyes as he leaned against the trunk.

The sounds of the insects and birds produced just the right noise to lull him to sleep quickly.

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